After Council Communism: The Post-War Rediscovery of the Council Tradition

Abstract:

This article traces a discontinuous tradition of council thought from the Dutch and German council communist tendencies of the 1920s to its re-emergence in the writings of three important mid-twentieth century political theorists: Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort and Hannah Arendt. It connects an intellectual history of the council concept in post-war Europe with a political history of the small revolutionary groups that fostered council-related political activity during this era. It claims that as the experience of the European council movements began to be interpreted within a new political context, this gave rise to several radically altered forms of council thought. In this more subjectivist and praxis-oriented tradition, the councils became a utopian placeholder for theorists to explore their particular interests in human creativity (Castoriadis), self-limiting power (Lefort), and political freedom (Arendt). This analysis develops our understanding of the continuities and ruptures of the council tradition within political thought.

Key Words: council communism, socialism, Hannah Arendt, Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis

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Introduction

Drawing inspiration from the Paris Commune and the workers' councils that emerged during the 1905 Russian Revolution, council movements arose across Europe and Russia in the final years of the First World War.[1] These workers' councils were radically democratic organisations with recallable delegates elected from workplaces and subject to imperative mandates. Radical delegates from within the council movements developed plans to institute workers' control over economic institutions and to democratise a broad range of authority structures such as workplaces, the army and the civil service.[2] Council movements developed in Russia, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Italy and the UK and even managed to institute a number of short-lived council republics in Bavaria, Bremen and Hungary. Although these experiments in council politics were brief, they had a lasting effect on the development of political thought. Following the dramatic events of the rise and fall of the council movements in 1917-1920, the councils became a controversial symbol within the European labour movement: venerated by some as an ideal form of revolutionary organisation, and dismissed by others as a futile utopian fantasy. The councils became an object of fascination for socialists who were interested in the idea of workers' self-emancipation, but who were critical of the progress of the Russian Revolution and certain aspects of Leninism and Trotskyism. The council tradition is characterised by its criticisms of bureaucracy, party politics and trade unions; and its advocacy for some role for councils either as revolutionary organs of struggle or as the institutional basis for a council republic.

[1] O. Anweiler, *Die Rätebewegung in Russland 1905–1921* (Leiden, 1958); D. Gluckstein, *The Western Soviets: Workers' councils versus Parliament, 1915–1920* (London: 1985).
[2] See E. Mandel, 'Workers' Control and Workers' Councils,' *International*, 2 (1) (Spring 1973), pp. 1–17.

There is currently a revival of 'councilist' political theory, which seeks to draw from the political experiences of the European council movements. John Medearis has taken inspiration from the council movements alongside theorists such as Karl Marx and John Dewey to construct an innovative theory of democratic action as an egalitarian struggle against the alienation of social forces and institutions.[3] Martin Breaugh has highlighted a subterranean tradition of politics based on plebeian uprisings, which contributes to a post-Marxist and broadly councilist body of political thought through a survey of a number of historical periods from the first Roman plebeian secession of 494 BC to the Paris Commune.[4] Yohan Dubigeon has developed an original perspective on the history of council democracy by interpreting it as an anti-state form of self-government according to a bottom-up theory of power and a desire to deprofessionalise political activity.[5] Additionally, a broad range of reflections on the council movements has recently been published from a historical angle in *Ours to Master Ours to Own, Workers' Councils: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present*, and from a theoretical perspective in *Council Democracy: Towards a Democratic Socialist Politics*.[6] It has not been since the 1960s student

[3] J. Medearis, *Why Democracy is Oppositional* (Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 129–133; See also J. Medearis, 'Lost or Obscured? How V.I. Lenin, Joseph Schumpeter and Hannah Arendt Misunderstood the Council Movement', *Polity*, 36 (3) (2004), pp. 447–76; J. Medearis, 'After the Councils: Opposing Domination and Developing Democratic Agency,' in ed., J. Muldoon, *Council Democracy: Towards a Democratic Socialist Politics* (London, 2018), pp. 191–209.

[4] M. Breaugh, *The Plebeian Experience: A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom* (Columbia, 2013).

[5] Y. Dubigeon, *La démocratie des conseils: Aux origins modernes de l'autogouvernement* (Paris, 2017).

[6] D. Azzellini and I. Ness, eds., *Ours to Master Ours to Own, Workers' Councils: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present* (Chicago, 2011); J. Muldoon, "Council Democracy: Towards a Democratic Socialist Politics," in ed., J. Muldoon *Council Democracy: Towards a Democratic Socialist Politics* (London, 2018) pp. 1–30. See also G. Kets and J. Muldoon, "The "Forgotten" German Revolution: A Conceptual Map," in eds. G. Kets and J. Muldoon *The German Revolution and Political Theory* (London: Palgrave, 2019), pp. 1–24.

movements and the fiftieth anniversary of the council movements that they have experienced such a rejuvenation of historical interest.[7]

In light of this return to the political experiences of the council movements, this article seeks to uncover a discontinuous tradition of council thought through an analysis of three important mid-twentieth century political theorists: Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort and Hannah Arendt. It combines an intellectual history of the council concept in post-war Europe with a political history of the small revolutionary groups that fostered council-related political activity during this era. To this end, the article puts forward three central claims. First, it claims that in post-War Europe following the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, there was a revival of councilist political thought, which exercised a significant influence over the libertarian left through the adoption of notions of direct democracy, worker self-emancipation and a critique of hierarchy and bureaucracy. The existing literature on council thought tends to focus on the most immediate influence of the council movements on the Dutch and German council communist tendencies of the 1920s, while ignoring the later rediscovery of the councils by libertarian socialists and the New Left.[8] I call this tradition discontinuous because with the decline of council communism in the 1920s

[7] See, for example, P. Oertzen, *Betriebsräte in der Novemberrevolution. Eine politikwissenschaftliche Untersuchung über Ideengahalt und Struktur der betrieblichen und wirtschaftlichen Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Revolution 1918* (Berlin: 1963); E. Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik, 1918-1919* (Berlin: 1962).

[8] Intellectual historians have shown interest in the major theoreticians of the councils in the 1920s, with a number of studies of A. Pannekoek, H. Gorter, O. Rühle and K. Korsch. H. Gorter, A. Pannekoek, S. Pankhurst, *Non-Leninist Marxism: Writings on the Workers Councils* (London, 2007); John Gerber, *Anton Pannekoek and the Socialism of Workers' Self-Emancipation 1873-1960* (Dordrecht, 1989); S. Bricianer, *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils* (St. Louis, 1978 [1969]); H.M. Bock, *Pannekoek und Gorter: Organisation und Taktik der proletarischen Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main, 1969); P. Mattick, *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* (London, 1978).

the council movements were interpreted in the post-war era within a new political context and enlisted in new politico-theoretical projects.[9]

The second claim of this article relates to the theoretical figures of the revival of council thought. In constructing this discontinuous tradition, I connect three theorists who have been interpreted within the broad tradition of radical democracy, but not as part of a shared council tradition. Cornelius Castoriadis is generally not regarded as a council theorist in part because his writings on the councils belong to an earlier period of his thought which has been interpreted as a pre-history to his later theory of a self-instituting society.[10] However, Christopher Holman has broken new ground in interpreting the councils analysed in Castoriadis' early thought as a suitable institutional form for the creative self-determination later identified by Castoriadis as the essence of human beings.[11] Castoriadis' theory of council democracy emphasises the open-ended creative development of social life rather than the rationalisation of economic production.

Interpreters of the writings of Claude Lefort have mostly failed to analyse the theme of the councils in his work.[12] Lefort offered two different interpretations of the

[9] Regarding the political activity of council communists during the 1930s, The Dutch Group of International Communists (GIK), consisting of members such as Cajo Brendel, Henk Meijer and Paul Mattick, formed in 1927 and published a number of important theoretical works in addition to the journal *Rätekorrespondenz* (Council Correspondence). See Philippe Bourrinet, *The Dutch and German Communist Left (1900-1968): 'Neither Lenin Nor Trotsky Nor Stalin!' - 'All Workers Must Think for Themselves!'* (Leiden, 2016), pp. 277–430.

[10] B. Singer, 'Cornelius Castoriadis: Auto-Institution and Radical Democracy,' *Thinking Radical Democracy: The Return to Politics in Post- War France*. eds. M. Breaugh, C. Holman, R. Magnusson, P. Mazzocchi and D. Penner (Toronto, 2015), pp. 141– 60, p. 141.

[11] C. Holman, 'The Councils as Ontological Form Cornelius Castoriadis and the Autonomous Potential of Council Democracy,' *Council Democracy: Towards a Democratic Socialist Politics*, ed. J. Muldoon (London, 2018), pp. 131– 49, p. 132.

[12] For the first comprehensive analysis see B. Popp-Madsen, 'The Self- Limiting Revolution and the Mixed Constitution of Socialist Democracy Claude Lefort's Vision of Council Democracy,' *Council Democracy: Towards a Democratic Socialist Politics*, ed. J. Muldoon (London, 2018), pp. 168–88. See also A. Arato, 'Lefort, the Philosopher of 1989,' in *Claude Lefort: Thinker of the Political*. ed. M. Plot

council tradition at different moments of his life. While his early work followed the theoretical outline of Castoriadis, his later analysis put forward an ideal of a socialist democracy on the basis of a council system co-existing alongside a parliament and trade unions in a self-limiting system of checks and balances.[13] Lefort developed a novel interpretation of workers' councils existing within a pluralist system in which sovereignty was divided between different sources, thus departing from the unitary schemes of the council tradition.

References to a council system in Hannah Arendt's work have traditionally been dismissed by scholars as a naïve political ideal or a hopelessly unrealistic proposal, although recently they have received more attention.[14] Arendt departed from the socialist tradition of workers' councils to interpret them as ideal republican institutions that fostered political action and preserved spaces of freedom in democratic societies. More so than either Castoriadis or Lefort, Arendt re-invented the council tradition in a novel form, connecting it to a participatory republican tradition and distancing the councils' activities from the management of economic production. Implicit in my interpretation is that the influence of the council tradition is more pronounced in each theorist than has been generally acknowledged. Considered together, they represent the most sophisticated and interesting projects of the council tradition within mid-twentieth century political thought.

(London, 2013), pp. 116–17.

[13] C. Lefort, 'La question de la revolution' *L'invention democratique: Les limites de la domination totalitaire* (Paris, 1994).

[14] M. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 235. J. Sitton, 'Hannah Arendt's Argument for Council Democracy,' *Polity* 20 (1) (1987), pp. 80–100; J. Muldoon, 'The Lost Treasure of Arendt's Council System,' *Critical Horizons* 12 (3) (2011), pp. 396–417; S. Buckler, *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory: Challenging the Tradition* (Edinburgh, 2011), pp. 104–26; S. Lederman, 'Hannah Arendt, the Council System and Contemporary Political Theory,' *Council Democracy: Towards a Democratic Socialist Politics*, ed. J. Muldoon (London, 2018), pp. 150–67.

Third, the article traces the emergence of several strikingly new forms of council thought, which departs in significant ways from the earlier council tradition. The council communist groups that re-emerged after the war were much smaller than the old socialist parties and lacked organic connections to workers' movements. Groups such as *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and the Situationist International tended to be composed of middle-class intellectuals and were not part of broader workers' organisations. As a result, the main activity of these groups tended to be writing and publishing journals rather than participation in political organising. While the initial theorists of councils were long-time participants in large workers' organisations and viewed their theoretical contributions as offering revolutionary strategy to the movement, individuals in these new groups could no longer claim a strong connection with a social force capable of putting their theory in action. As the sociological background and principal activities of the council theorists changed, so too did their political ideology. Without the possibility of revolutionary struggle based on the mass participation of workers in councils, the role of the councils in political theory became more of a utopian placeholder for various images of an emancipated society. Support for workers' councils came to signify a rejection of unions, parliamentary politics and forms of institutionalised politics that operated within the existing status quo. In this more subjectivist and praxis-oriented tradition of council thought, the councils also became a site for theorists to explore their particular interests in human creativity (Castoriadis), self-limiting power (Lefort), and political action (Arendt).

I classify the three theorists broadly within the post-Marxist (Castoriadis), liberal (Lefort) and republican (Arendt) camps. Castoriadis conceived of the councils as a

basis for a truly autonomous social and political life; Lefort sought to incorporate the councils form into a liberal democratic society – the opposite of totalitarianism – in which conflict would be permanently institutionalized; and Arendt viewed the activity of political councils as exemplary of true political action. As it was reinterpreted through these various competing theoretical frameworks, council theory also shed some of its more practical orientation. The councils took on a more ideological dimension as a floating signifier in the political imaginary. At its best, this involved creative appropriations of the councils in novel and productive directions. For other groups, however, the councils were reduced to an empty slogan and an article of blind faith.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it analyses the emergence of the first generation of council communism and traces the roots of the post-war development in council thought to the Hungarian uprising of 1956. It then outlines the formation of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and its most prominent political theorists, Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort. Attention is then briefly turned to another French radical group, the Situationist International, and the writings of Guy Debord. Hannah Arendt is then discussed in order to examine the disavowal of the workers' tradition within her republican political theory of a council system. Finally, the article turns to the Anglo-American socialist and critical theory tradition to outline the continuation of council communism in the US and UK and highlight the few brief references to workers' councils in the writings of the Frankfurt School.

The Transmission of the Council Movements into Political Thought

In the early 1920s a council communist ideology developed as an alternative to the official communism of the Soviet Union.[15] It arose in the German and Dutch sections of the Communist International from 1921, although its origins can be traced back to earlier disputes within the Second International and to movements that developed in Germany in opposition to Germany's involvement in the First World War.[16] Early theoretical developments were already present in Rosa Luxemburg's writings on the mass strike and Anton Pannekoek's emphasis on the importance of revolutionary class-consciousness in political struggle.[17] These theorists questioned the bureaucracy and closure of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and argued for the independence of local groups and more direct participation of workers in political action. Karl Liebknecht was also critical of the SPD's decision to grant war credits and was imprisoned for organising resistance to the war. Through dissident groups who opposed the war, discussion was already underway during 1917 in the final years of the war for radical groups to form a new party that would have a different structure and strategic goals to the SPD.[18]

Council communists maintained that "the emancipation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves" and argued that workers' councils were the most

[15] For historical overviews of council communism see P.J. Rachleff, *Marxism and Council Communism, The foundation for revolutionary theory for modern society* (New York, 1976); Bourrinet, *The Dutch and German Communist Left (1900-1968)*; M. Linden, 'On Council Communism; *Historical Materialism* 12 (4) (2004), pp. 27–50.
[16] For an overview of these debates see Bourrinet, *The Dutch and German Communist Left (1900-1968)*.
[17] R. Luxemburg, 'The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions'; A. Pannekoek, 'Mass Action and Revolution'; A. Pannekoek, 'Marxist Theory and Revolutionary Tactics' in *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism* (London, 1978).
[18] J. Gerber, *Anton Pannekoek and the Socialism of Workers' Self-Emancipation, 1873-1960* (Dordrecht, 1989), pp. 118–20.

effective organisational form for struggling against capitalism.[19] Council communists were critical of a Leninist model of revolutionary organisation and what they perceived as the growing bureaucratisation of the Russian Revolution. Due to their interest in workers' self-organisation, council communists criticised the replacement of workers' direct participation in political struggle with actions taken by a party leadership.[20]

Council communism was based on the principle of the self-emancipation of the working class and advocated for working-class struggle through the organisational form of workers' councils as the preferred method for challenging capitalism and forming the basis of a post-capitalist society.[21] One of the fundamental bases of the split between council communists and the Bolsheviks was over the applicability of Lenin's revolutionary strategy for Western Europe due to different historical conditions. In Herman Gorter's open letter to Lenin, he argued that the Russian revolutionaries enjoyed the support of poor peasants and an underdeveloped bourgeois sector; whereas the German working-class stood alone against a much stronger state apparatus and developed bourgeois form of life.[22] As a result, Gorter thought that the workers' movement in Germany needed to pay more attention to developing its own autonomy and power because it faced a stronger enemy and could not rely on the support of other classes such as the peasants. Council communists therefore advocated for mass action from as wide a section of the proletariat as

[19] P.J. Rachleff, *Marxism and Council Communism, The foundation for revolutionary theory for modern society* (New York: 1976), chapter 8.
[20] A. Pannekoek, 'The German Revolution – First Stage,' *Workers Dreadnought*, 24 May 1919.
[21] For a more in-depth analysis of council communism as an ideology see J. Muldoon, "The Birth of Council Communism," *The German Revolution and Political Theory*, eds. G. Kets and J. Muldoon (London: 2019), pp. 339–361.
[22] H. Gorter, 'Open Letter to Comrade Lenin' (1920).

possible and for less mediation through what they perceived to be the bourgeois ideologies of parliamentary activity and trade-unionism.[23]

Council communist tendencies developed during the 1920s, yet throughout the same period workers' participation in council communist groups declined dramatically. In 1921 the KAPD had a membership of over 40,000, with another 200,000 in the closely aligned 'factory organisations' of the General Workers' Union of Germany (AAUD).[24] By the time Hitler took power only a few small groups of the German Left were still active.[25] The council communist international network, Communist Workers International (KAI), was founded in 1922, but never fully materialised due to the dissolution of some of its member organisations. Even at its peak it never contained more than 1000 members. By the 1930s, council communists only existed in small propaganda groups.[26]

The political experiences of the workers' councils and European council movements would be rediscovered and reinterpreted by the radical social movements that emerged in the 1960s and 70s as an important current of libertarian socialist thought.[27] However, the small groupings of council communists that arose in the post-war period never achieved the same large numbers as the former council communists of the 1920s or of the Trotskyist organisations of their own time. One of the primary

[23] Ibid.
[24] S. Pinta, 'Council Communist Perspectives on the Spanish Civil War and Revolution, 1936-1939,' *Libertarian Socialism: Politics in Black and Red***,** eds. A. Prichard, R. Kinna, S. Pinta, D. Berry (London, 2017), pp. 116–42, p. 123.
[25] G. Dauvé, *Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement* (London, 2015), pp. 93–4.
[26] The Dutch Group of International Communists (GIK), consisting of members such as Cajo Brendel, Henk Meijer and Paul Mattick, formed in 1927 and published a number of important theoretical works in addition to the journal *Rätekorrespondenz* (Council Correspondence). For an analysis of the council communists through the 1930s and 40s see Bourrinet, *The Dutch and German Communist Left (1900-1968)*, pp. 277–430.
[27] See B. Reichenbach and R. Dutschke, 'The KAPD in Retrospect: An Interview with a Member of the Communist Workers Party of Germany,' *Solidarity* 6 (2) (1969).

catalysts for a rejuvenation of interest in the councils after the Second World War was the formation of local revolutionary councils during the Hungarian Revolution from 23 October to 10 November 1956.[28] During an uprising against the Soviet regime, revolutionary councils and workers' councils arose in villages, towns and factories. They assumed various responsibilities of local government and management of industry. The councils co-ordinated to form a federal structure and received support from the Hungarian Working People's Party as 'autonomous, democratic local organs formed during the Revolution.'[29] While the Soviet Union initially declared they would withdraw Soviet troops from the territory of Hungary, the Politburo soon ordered a military intervention, which took place on 4 November 1956, crushing the revolution and suppressing public opposition to the new Soviet-installed government.[30] The re-emergence of spontaneous workers' councils had a profound effect on certain sections of the post-war European Left, with Arendt, Castoriadis and Lefort all writing articles on the Hungarian uprisings. For many Western communists already disillusioned with the Soviet Union this would provide further reason to break with official communist parties and begin smaller revolutionary groups that would inspire the New Left of the 1960s.

Cornelius Castoriadis and *Socialisme ou Barbarie*

The French political group, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (SB), began as a tendency within

[28] For an overview of the events see UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary* (New York, 1957).
[29] UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary* (New York: 1957), pp. 154–70.
[30] 'Declaration of the Government of the USSR on the Principles of Development and Further Strengthening of Friendship and Cooperation between the Soviet Union and other Socialist States 30 October 1956,' *The Department of State Bulletin*, XXXV, No. 907 (12 November 1956), pp. 745–47.

the Trotskyist *Parti Communiste Internationaliste* (PCI) and broke away in 1948 to form its own group and journal. Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort were joined by other, now less well-known, intellectuals and workers to develop a critique of bureaucracy (both capitalist and state socialist) and advance a vision of worker self-management and autonomy through workers' councils. Attentive to the experiences of workers, SB published a combination of articles by workers on their immediate situation and more general political analyses on revolutionary theory. As Castoriadis recounted, SB began to attract 'groups of the old, radical left: Bordigists, council communists, some anarchists and some offspring of the German 'left' of the 1920s.'[31] In comparison to the older workers' movements and parties of the 1920s, SB was small and never had more than 100 members. However, at its peak it exercised considerable influence over libertarian socialist currents of the Left, selling up to 1,000 copies of each issue of their journal.[32] It had ambitions to form international connections, but failed to agree on a joint international bulletin with groups from Italy, Belgium and the UK at a conference in Paris in May 1961.

SB imagined itself as a revolutionary organisation elucidating revolutionary strategy and providing critical intellectual tools to elements of the workers' avant-garde.[33] It was critical of official communist parties and social democratic parties, which it perceived to be acting against the interests of workers, leaving SB as the true heirs of working-class revolutionary struggle and 'the living continuation of Marxism within

[31] C. Castoriadis, '"The Only Way to Find Out If You Can Swim Is to Get into the Water": An Introductory Interview (1974),' *The Castoriadis Reader* (Oxford, 1997), p. 5.
[32] Ibid., p. 13.
[33] C. Castoriadis, 'Proletariat and Organization,' in *Cornelius Castoriadis: Political and Social Writings Volume 2 1955-1960: From the Workers' Struggle Against Bureaucracy to Revolution in the Age of Modern Capitalism*, ed. D. Curtis (Minneapolis, 1988), pp. 193–222.

society today.'[34] In reality, the small group formed at a relatively low-point in the history of revolutionary struggle and had few organic connections to working-class movements. As Guy Debord witnessed during his brief membership of SB in 1960-61, the groups' inflexible internal hierarchies did not reflect its self-conception as a fluid revolutionary organisation. He also argued that as they did not know who was actually reading their journals, their readership probably reflected the backgrounds of the group itself: urban, intellectual and Marxist, rather than the working-class avant-garde whose image SB constructed in its journal and to whom it purported to speak.[35] The transformation of class relations in post-war Europe, which included an increasing incorporation of working-class movements into capitalist structures and a decline in the numbers of the industrial proletariat, led to a crisis in SB over the proper role of revolutionary organisations. The group struggled to maintain cohesiveness and direction, and suffered a number of internal splits before its final dissolution in 1967.

When the Hungarian workers' councils arose in 1956, they had a significant impact on the group. Castoriadis posited that: 'Over the coming years, all significant questions will be condensed into one: Are you for or against the action and the program of the Hungarian workers?'[36] The return of the council from confirmed a set of theoretical analyses developed by Castoriadis and SB on the historical development of the proletarian movement and revolutionary forms of organisation. Many of Castoriadis' commentators fail to see the central significance of autonomous workers'

[34] Castoriadis, 'Presentation', (*S. ou B.*, No. 1).
[35] S. Hastings-King, 'L'Internationale Situationniste, Socialisme ou Barbarie, and the Crisis of the Marxist Imaginary,' *SubStance* 28 (3) (1999), pp. 26–54.
[36] Castoriadis, 'The Proletarian Revolution Against the Bureacracy,' in *Cornelius Castoriadis: Political and Social Writings Volume 2*, pp. 57–89.

councils to the development of his political thought.[37] Yet as Manuel Cervera-Marzal points out, Castoriadis 'never ceased to defend the idea that a true democracy should function like a system of councils.'[38] Christopher Holman argues that rather than constituting merely a pre-history to his main ouevre, workers' councils are an adequate institutional form for the ongoing self-institution of society and the expression of human creativity.[39]

Already in 1955 in 'The Contents of Socialism,' Castoriadis had developed a critique of Trotsky's theory of Russia as a degenerate workers' state and put forward a vision of a socialist society organised through workers' councils. He argued that bureaucracy had arisen in both capitalist and state socialist societies and that the fundamental antagonism was now between a class of directors who controlled society and an underclass of executants who were reduced to simply following orders. In Russia, the nationalisation of industry and institution of central planning had proved insufficient to provide workers with self-managed workplaces. The task of bureaucratic management had just been transferred from capitalists to a new class of officials in the party bureaucracy. Following this critique of bureaucracy and heteronomy, Castoriadis considered that 'socialism in all its aspects does not signify anything other than workers' management of society.'[40] For Castoriadis, 'the masses' conscious and perpetual self-managerial activity' would be organised by 'the power of the masses' autonomous organizations (soviets or councils)' and 'workers' management of the

[37] See for example, J. Klooger, *Castoriadis: Psyche, Society, Autonomy* (Leiden: 2009); S. Adams, *Castoriadis' Ontology: Being and Creation* (New York, 2011); Cf. C. Memos, *Castoriadis and Critical Theory: Crisis, Critique and Radical Alternatives* (Basingstoke: 2014), pp. 51–5.
[38] M. Cervera-Marzal, 'Miguel Abensour, Cornelius Castoriadis: un conseillisme français?,' *Revue du MAUSS* 40 (2012), pp. 300–20, p. 317.
[39] C. Holman, 'The Councils as Ontological Form: Cornelius Castoriadis and the Autonomous Potential of Council Democracy,' in J. Muldoon (ed.), *Council Democracy* (London: 2018) pp. 131–49.
[40] Castoriadis, 'The Contents of Socialism,' in *The Castoriadis Reader*, p. 48.

economy, i.e. the producers' direction of production, also organized in soviet-style organs.'[41]

Following the re-emergence of workers' councils in Hungary, there were several specific aspects that Castoriadis found of particular importance. First, they aimed not simply to manage enterprises or enact piecemeal reforms, but for a complete restructuring of society. This is what distinguished the Hungarian example from other uprisings and programs for self-management: it was a genuine revolution, which posited new political principles, new social meanings and new modes of organising social life based on the creative activity of the Hungarian people. The demands of the councils were completely in opposition to the bureaucracy of the Stalinist regime:

> 'The demands were for self-management in the enterprises, abolition of work norms, a drastic reduction in income inequalities, control of general planning activities, control of the composition of the Government and a new orientation of the country's foreign policy.'[42]

Central for Castoriadis was the councils' desire to abolish former work norms and completely transform the structure of how work was performed. Rather than simply replacing one ruling bureaucracy with another, the councils aimed at changing the very rhythm of work processes to become a more natural expression of the autonomous activity of workers. The councils aimed to establish workers' control and ownership and overcome the alienation of work life. Further, the councils did not envisage themselves as temporary institutions ready to be disbanded after the revolution was over, but as the germs of a new institutional order, which began being immediately constructed during the first days of the revolution.

[41] Ibid., p. 47.
[42] Castoriadis, 'The Hungarian Source,' in *Political and Social Writings, vol. 3*, p. 7.

The Hungarian Revolution also offered Castoriadis an insight into how a bureaucratic capitalist society could be transformed through the spontaneous self-organisation of the masses through councils. In comparison to the earlier council communists, Castoriadis placed less emphasis on the councils' proletarian nature or even the institutional form of the councils as such. Rather, he viewed the importance of the councils in their capacity to overcome a number of primary divisions in capitalist society by instituting direct-democracy, worker self-management and councils based on existing organic collectives rather than artificial territorial units. Firstly, the most important division that Castoriadis believed needed to be overcome was not simply society's division into classes but the unwritten division between rulers and ruled, or in Castoriadis' terms, between directors and executants.[43] With the mass of people involved in processes of self-organisation and self-management following the de-professionalisation of politics, society would no longer be directed exclusively by a class of politicians and high-level bureaucrats. Secondly, the councils would also render the distinction between the narrow governmental sphere of the political and broader social life redundant. The institution of direct democracy would abolish the older parliamentary system of semi-permanent delegation of political responsibilities to a ruling elite of political representatives. A separate political sphere (the state) becomes redundant for the organisation of social life because it begins to become self-managed by the people themselves engaged in the continual and active exercise of public power. Finally, Castoriadis believed that the federal structure of the Hungarian councils overcame the distinction between the day-to-day activities of local affairs and broader political issues of national importance. A federal system with recallable

[43] Castoriadis, 'Contents of Socialism II,' in *The Castoriadis Reader*, p. 50.

delegates allowed citizens to self-manage activities in their local workplace and neighbourhood, but also participate in decisions through delegates under imperative mandate to decide on larger issues that affected society in general.

Even after twenty years reflection, Castoriadis still maintained that the Hungarian workers' councils held an exemplary significance as institutions for the self-organisation of society. In his return to the councils twenty years later in 'The Hungarian Source,' he began to place less emphasis on specific institutional arrangements and more on their role as open and transformable sites for the general self-institution of society. In contrast to certain earlier council communists, Castoriadis was not wedded to the precise organisational form of councils. Rather, he viewed them as a means through which workers could engage in self-activity and society could become more self-determining. For Castoriadis, the councils were not an end point in organisational development, but rather an open site for the realisation of human creativity. The crucial ingredient for autonomy was not the council form, but the participation and involvement of the masses in the management and planning of social life. The councils only opened the possibility of autonomous activity, which was foreclosed by the institutional arrangements of representative democracy and state socialism. Incorporating his new ontological discoveries of the self-instituting society, Castoriadis argued that 'the form of the revolution and of post-revolutionary society is not an institution or an organisation given once and for all, but the *activity* of self-organisation, or self-institution.'[44] The councils facilitated this process, but without mass participation the councils could easily deteriorate into empty bureaucratic institutions.

[44] Castoriadis, 'The Revolutionary Exigency,' in *Political and Social Writings, vol. 3,* p. 238.

The Hungarian Revolution, then, delivered fresh confirmation of the relevance and validity of Castoriadis' political orientation and provided new impetus to develop in more detail, 'the problem of how positively to organize a collective, socialized management of production and power.'[45] The tension in Castoriadis' account of the councils lies in his desire to articulate a vision of the councils as the specific content of socialism, but for this content to be ultimately the formal condition of autonomy understood as creative self-direction. At its most basic, Castoriadis argues that 'socialism is autonomy, people's conscious direction of their own lives.'[46] He seeks to offer political principles, strategic guidance and institutional arrangements that might assist people in acting autonomously, without this theory becoming a set of dogmas that would constrain free action. His criticism of previous council theorists was that they allowed a deterministic vision of the laws of capitalism to constrain their understanding of popular creativity and spontaneous action. He is wary of dogmatic principles that deny the contingency of human history and which can end up restricting the very action they seek to enable. For Castoriadis, his work is devoted not to an elaboration of past historical examples, but to council systems of the future, which he sought to explore theoretically and incite with his work.

Ultimately, his vision of a fully autonomous council society relied on a utopian ideal of large-scale direct democracy, whereby sovereignty would be placed in a general assembly of all citizens in which they would be constantly politically active and engaged in deliberation and decision-making. He admitted that this would require enormous effort on the part of citizens: 'a tremendous amount of activity, abnegation

[45] Castoriadis, 'Contents of Socialism II,' in *The Castoriadis Reader*, p. 47.
[46] Ibid., p. 51.

and self-sacrifice, an extraordinary expenditure of energy.'[47] The utopian dimension of Castoriadis' account is palpable in his complete rejection of any form of bureaucratisation or representation as threats to autonomy, which leaves his vision of the councils dependant on the permanent maintenance of extraordinary levels of public participation and political activity. The expression of human creativity required the activation of large segments of society in self-organising activities vastly higher than anything achieved under current capitalist societies.

Claude Lefort

As another central members of SB, Lefort's early interpretation of the Hungarian Revolution was instrumental to the direction of the group. His initial take on the unfolding events in Hungary, published in '*L'insurrection hongroise*' (*SouB No. 20*), helped shape the group's narrative of the Hungarian Revolution as an anti-bureaucratic social revolution, which could be distinguished from other less significant uprisings in Poland and East Germany.[48] Along with Castoriadis, Lefort emphasised the novelty of the Hungarians' revolutionary program and the importance of workers' self-activity and creativity in the process. He argued that the most revolutionary aspect of the uprising was the factory councils, which presented a germ of a directly democratic system that could be expanded upon to develop a self-managed society.

[47] Castoriadis, 'The Hungarian Source,' in *Political and Social Writings, vol. 3,* p. 261.
[48] C. Lefort, 'The Hungarian Insurrection,' in *A Socialisme ou Barbarie Anthology: Autonomy, Critique, and Revolution in the Age of Bureaucratic Capitalism*. pp. 201–23. Accessed at http://notbored.org/SouBA.pdf.

In 1956-57 Lefort's interpretation of the events in Hungary was similar to Castoriadis and other members of SB. However, this Marxist and generally optimistic reading of the councils was revisited twenty years later on the anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution. In the subsequent years, Lefort had expanded his critique of bureaucracy and totalitarianism to include criticisms of the Marxist imaginary and revolutionary politics as forms of organisational hierarchy that could potentially create the conditions for a system of domination. He came to view the principal opposition of politics as that between a closed, homogenous and power-concentrating program of totalitarianism and the open, necessarily divided and conflictual system of democracy. Whereas in totalitarianism state power pervades social relations and existing divisions are subsumed within the totalising power of one-party rule, democracy institutionalises internal division and conflict, creating an 'empty space' at the centre of the regime in which different groups, interest and opinions could co-exist as legitimate contenders for the temporary exercise of limited public power.[49]

This shift in perspective allowed Lefort in 'The Age of Novelty' and 'La question de la revolution' to reinterpret the Hungarian councils in a new light. He now considered the Hungarian people to have strived towards a balance between workers' councils, a multi-party parliamentary system and separate trade unions that would defend workers' interests and guarantee their right to strike. The crucial added ingredient was a power sharing arrangement based on the insight of the corrupting nature of a unified and concentrated system of power without internal divisions and checks; a lesson which he attributes to the experience of Hungarians living under totalitarianism. He traced evidence for this dualistic vision of democratic socialism in the councils'

[49] C. Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minnesota, 1989), p. 304.

reluctance to assume national power without the explicit agreement of regional councils and the liberal-democratic nature of their program.

> 'The democratic demands formulated by the Central Workers' Council were widely reported: pluralism of parties, freedom of expression, the guarantee of individual security, a parliament elected by universal suffrage, and a council composed of delegates from enterprises responsible for the management of the economy.'[50]

He emphasised that these liberal-democratic demands were not merely a confusion nor a return to bourgeois democracy, for the socialist dimensions of their program were explicit and the existence of workers' councils ensured that property would not passing back into private hands. What was essential in this anti-bureaucratic and anti-capitalist project was the demand for a divided system, which acknowledged the legitimate existence of divergent interests and differences of opinion. In what Lefort called a 'plural revolution,' not even the workers' councils should hold a monopoly on power.[51] Rather, the democratic socialist regime should institutionalise conflict between a politico-governmental sphere (parliament), a politico-economic sphere (councils), and the organised economic interests of the workers qua labourer (unions). The great improvement that Lefort considered the Hungarian people had made on previous versions of councilism was that they now 'showed new insight into the danger which issued from the development of their own power' such that 'the idea of a new revolutionary power totally in the workers' hands was condemned.'[52]

[50] Lefort, *Complications*, p. 97.
[51] C. Lefort, 'La question de la revolution' in *L'invention democratique*, pp. 189–91.
[52] C. Lefort, 'The Age of Novelty,' *Telos* 29 (1976), pp. 23–38.

There is some evidence to support aspects of Lefort's interpretation of the program of the Hungarian councils, although the fleeting existence of the movement makes it difficult to assess the precise nature of different tendencies within the movement or to determine their chances of success.[53] What is clear is that Lefort now stood one step removed from the revolutionary tradition itself, believing that the currents of Jacobinism, majoritarianism and substitutionism should be rejected by democratic forces to ensure that structures of domination would not be reproduced within a new society.

Like many other council theorists, Lefort stressed that the Hungarian Revolution should not be viewed as a model to be replicated under completely different conditions. Rather, it should serve as a lesson of the importance of not only the self-organisation of political collectives, but of the necessary limits that should be placed on the exercise of political power. With his more liberal interpretation of the council tradition, Lefort altered Castoriadis' vision of a self-instituting society and put forward a less demanding vision of political activity which more closely resembled the structures of twentieth-century liberal democracies. Due to the presence of the representative institutions of a liberal parliament alongside the councils and trade-unions, Lefort's final analysis did not require, and indeed was suspicious of, the permanent activation of the masses in constant political action.

Situationist International

[53] See UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary* (New York, 1957).

SB exercised a strong influence over other groups in France including the Situationist International (SI) who adopted their critique of the Soviet Union and support for workers' councils. SI was an international artistic movement and revolutionary group of around 10 to 20 people at any given time during its existence from 1957 to 1976. The movement, which was influential during the May '68 uprisings in France, developed a 20th century critique of capitalism by expanding on Marx's concepts of alienation and commodification, which they believed could now be applied to every aspect of social life. Guy Debord was the most prominent member of the group and became considered their de facto leader. The first mention of workers' councils in their publications occurred in *Internationale Situationniste* #6 in which the journal reflected on the history of the workers' movement in Europe and found that 'only the most radical current is worth preserving: that centered on the program of workers' councils.' [54] From 1961-67, the workers' councils received numerous laudatory references in the writings of SI. For example, in 1966 one of their pamphlets declared: 'the democracy of workers' councils is the solution to all the present separations.'[55]

Although they expressed great enthusiasm for workers' councils, SI never developed a concrete sense of what they understood by councils or how they fit into a coherent revolutionary strategy. Debord's writings on workers' councils, for example, never move beyond a mere proclamation of their centrality to political struggle. The councils were an important rallying cry for SI and as a result they appeared in numerous slogans and graffiti during May 68. However, the councils never received any significant theoretical treatment in SI's work. Without further clarification, Debord confidently asserted in *The Society of the Spectacle*, 'the power of workers'

[54] Situtationist International, '*Internationale Situationniste* #6' (Paris, 1961).
[55] Situtationist International, 'On the Poverty of Student Life,' (Strassbourg, 1966).

councils is the one context in which the problems of the revolution of the proletariat can be truly solved.'[56] The only articulation of a program of the councils is where Debord argued for a unitary concept of the councils as an institutional framework, which would hold 'all decision-making and executive powers in themselves and federat[e] with one another through the exchange of delegates answerable to the base and recallable at any time.'[57] Debord followed the earlier council tradition of council institutions as the only source of power in society.[58] The failure of the French workers to organise into councils during the crisis of May 1968 led to doubts about the continued importance of council thought. In spite of this, the last issue of *Internationale Situationniste* (#12, September 1969) ran two pieces on the councils before the group became inactive and later disbanded.[59]

Hannah Arendt

Another leading voice in twentieth century politics, Hannah Arendt, had a closer theoretical proximity to the European council movements than is often recognised. Her husband, Heinrich Blücher was a member of the Spartacus League, leading Arendt's biographer, Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, to surmise:

> 'The decline and fall of the German Communist party, as Blücher recounted it, provided Hannah Arendt with a clear image – one she never failed to refer to – of what any revolution cannot be without: spontaneously organized, locally based councils or *Räte*, which are

[56] G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, ed. Ken Knabb (New York, 2014).
[57] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, thesis 116.
[58] G. Debord, 'letter to Italian section of the SI in Milan and to Mario Perniola in Rome, 12 March 1969' in *Guy Debord, Correspondance, Volume 4, 1969-1972* (Ligugé, 2004).
[59] R. Riesel, 'Preliminaries on the Councils and Councilist Organization,' and R. Vaneigem, 'Notice to the Civilized Concerning Generalized Self-Management.

> controlled neither by existing party councils – in this case, those of the Social Democratic party – nor any external, foreign organizations, in this case the Moscow party.'[60]

While references to a council system in Arendt's work are often dismissed by scholars as an afterthought and a utopian system, the ideal of a council democracy played a crucial role throughout her career: from her earliest writings on Jewish politics to her later political theory of action, freedom and revolution.[61] Arendt described the council system as the formation of a federal state composed of a network of councils organised into a pyramidal structure. Lower councils were territorially based and would operate at a grass-roots level from which delegates would be elected to sit on progressively higher councils ending in a council parliament. The councils were a key component in her understanding of democratic politics and the institutionalisation of freedom. She argued that the councils were a 'direct regeneration of democracy,' although, perhaps not in the state-centric and representative way it has traditionally been understood.[62] Her conception of a council system was influenced by the European council movements through her husband, Heinrich Blücher, and her reading of Rosa Luxemburg. But it was also shaped by her practical experiences of Jewish *kibbutzim* and her interpretation of the Athenian polis.[63]

While references to the councils can be located throughout Arendt's writings, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 offered Arendt new hope for the realisation of the

[60] E. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 128.
[61] Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, *pp.* 232–38; J. Muldoon, 'The Origins of Hannah Arendt's Council System,' *History of Political Thought* 37 (2) (Summer, 2016).
[62] Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 255.
[63] Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, p. 399; Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 257.

council system in the modern world.[64] On the anniversary of the Hungarian people's rebellion against the communist regime, Arendt wrote in support of the councils as a political form.[65]

Arendt's reading of the council tradition involved a complex and contradictory relationship with the workers' movements. On the one hand, Arendt had to rely on the history of the workers movements: from the Paris Commune to the Russian Revolution of 1905, 1917 and the German Revolution of 1918-19 for all of the practical realisations of the council form. Yet, on the other hand, Arendt stressed that the councils should not be understood as an attempt to organise workplaces or as essentially concerned with socio-economic affairs. Arendt acknowledged the 'extraordinarily productive role which the labor movements have played in modern politics,' one in which the 'European working class' wrote 'one of the most glorious and probably the most promising chapter of recent history.'[66] Yet she sought to argue that in their attempts to democratise workplaces and to introduce forms of workers' control into factories, these movements were misguided. She doubted whether it would even be 'possible to run factories under the management and ownership of the workers'.[67] Rather than cite Pannekoek and Rühle in her discussions of the councils, Arendt turned to Jefferson's late writings on a ward system and the activities of the

[64] For Arendt's references the councils see: H. Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007) pp. 343–74, pp. 388–401; H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958) pp. 215–20, Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 247–73; Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, pp. 189–91, Arendt, 'Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution'; H. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970) p. 52; Arendt, 'On Hannah Arendt,' in Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, p. 327; Arendt, 'The Impotence of Power,' Arendt Papers, 014410.
[65] Arendt, 'Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution'.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Arendt, 'Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution,' 29. Eric J. Hobsbawm, 'Hannah Arendt on Revolution,' in *Revolutionaries* (New York, 1973), p. 207. For a recent collection of studies on workers' control of factories see I. Ness and D. Azzellini eds., *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present* (Chicago, 2011).

popular societies of the French Revolution in an attempt to give the council tradition a republican rather than a socialist interpretation.

Arendt attempted to identify two distinct trends in the tradition of the workers' movement: an economic one concerned with the organisation of factories, and a political one which strived for political freedom. She conceded that 'the line between political and economic demands, between political organizations and trade unions, was blurred enough,' but she argued one could still distinguish between them and that 'the two should not be confused.'[68] This distinction relates to Arendt's attempt to separate a political realm of freedom from a non-political realm of necessity. One of the most persistent criticisms of her work has been that this distinction is difficult to maintain in practice.[69] Arendt's interpretation of the Hungarian Revolution was indicative of her political analysis of the councils: she argued that they could be divided into two types: the political revolutionary councils and the economic workers' councils. However, evidence suggested that the revolutionaries were influenced by a socialist ideology and that councils undertook joint political and economic functions. Her interpretation of the Hungarian Revolution thus raises questions. Even the United Nations report on the uprisings, which was one of Arendt's primary source material, stated that the councils represented the 'first practical step to restore order and to reorganize the Hungarian economy on a socialist basis.'[70] The report went on to argue that the councils' 'chief purpose was to ensure for the Hungarian people real, and not

[68] Ibid., pp. 215–16.
[69] Habermas, 'Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power,' p. 15; Richard J. Bernstein, 'Hannah Arendt: The Ambiguities of Theory and Practice,' in *Political Theory and Praxis: New Perspectives*, ed. Terrence Ball (Minneapolis, 1977), pp. 141–58; Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob.* For an attempt to push back against the dominant reading of Arendt as attempting to purify politics of socio-economic concerns and an argument for the importance of economic matters for public life in Arendt's work see Steven Klein, ''Fit to Enter the World': Hannah Arendt on Politics, Economics and the Welfare State,' *American Political Science Review* 108 (4) (2014), pp. 856–69.
[70] Ibid., p. 22.

merely nominal, control of local government and of factories, mines, and other industrial enterprises.'[71]

Her attempt to distinguish the political from the economic activities of the councils reflects her broader project within political theory of separating what she perceived as "purely political" matters from socio-economic concerns. There is a division within Arendt's political ontology between a sphere of freedom characterised by political action and a sphere of necessity in which labour and reproductive activities predominate.[72] The nature and interpretation of this division has been subject to much debate within Arendt scholarship, but I argue it is difficult for her supporters to avoid some version of this claim.[73]

The councils were of importance to Arendt because they appear to offer an institutionalised space in which ordinary citizens can engage in the political activities of deliberation and decision-making. Arendt described the 'content of freedom' as 'participation in public affairs, or admission to the public realm.'[74] She agreed with Jefferson that 'political freedom, generally speaking, means the right "to be a participator in government", or it means nothing' [75] In large representative democracies in which citizens give up much of the day-to-day work of government to professional politicians, what Arendt saw in the councils was a genuine attempt to retrieve a notion of political freedom understood as participation in government. Her attempt to integrate the councils as a grass-roots democratic organ into the

[71] The United Nations, *Report of the Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary*, p. 154.
[72] R. J. Bernstein, 'Hannah Arendt: The Ambiguities of Theory and Practice', in *Political Theory and Praxis: New Perspectives*, Terrence Ball ed., (Minneapolis, 1977), pp. 141–158; H. Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago and London, 1998).
[73] See J. Muldoon, "The Origins of Hannah Arendt's Council System," *History of Political Thought* 37 (2) (2016): 1–29.
[74] Ibid, p. 22.
[75] Ibid., p. 210.

institutional fabric of a modern republic was a call to actualise this principle of freedom.

The councils opened up spaces in which the people themselves 'could become visible and be of significance.'[76] Arendt imagined a wholesale shift away from 'a form of government where the few rule, at least supposedly, in the interest of the many' and where 'public freedom' is 'the privilege of the few.'[77] True political freedom would require 'the people *qua* people to make their entrance into political life and to become participators in government.'[78] Arendt's vision was of a self-determining political community in which a right to participate directly in the affairs of actual processes of governance was institutionalised for all members of society. She referred to the 'good fortune' of the Americans' 'widespread experience with self-government' prior to the revolution, which they gained from participating in local, decentralised, self-governing communities.[79]

A critical question in Arendt's theory concerns the proper tasks of the councils. If she did not consider them suitable for the organisation of economic production, then what was their intended role? Arendt argued that the absence of administrative tasks of the councils would allow them to fulfil their primary task: create an institutional space for deliberation and decision-making on political matters. For Arendt, there could be a strict separation of properly political concerns from the tasks of administration in a modern society. As has been aptly demonstrated in John Sitton's analysis of Arendt's council system, this was based on her mistaken belief that it would soon be possible

[76] Ibid., p. 119.
[77] Ibid., p. 261.
[78] Ibid., p. 269.
[79] Ibid., p. 156.

for modern technology to handle "all economic matters on technical and scientific grounds, outside of all political considerations."[80] For her, advances in technology would provide society with a greater capacity to organise the economic sphere more efficiently. Arendt assumed that technical questions could be put outside of the sphere of politics and decided in an objective manner by professional administrators.

Socialist and Critical Theory

The council tradition was also continued by small sections of the Left in the Anglo-American tradition. Whilst council ideas such as the importance of self-emancipation and principles of direct democracy were influential over broad sections of the New Left, the direct advocacy of workers' councils was constrained to small groups. In the US, Paul Mattick had helped found and publish the journal *International Council Correspondence*, which operated through the 1930s. The Johnson-Forest Tendency also operated in the US as a Left Communist group critical of Leninist politics, but without explicit connections to the council communist tradition. Interest in the councils was also maintained by a council communist group called *Root and Branch*, founded in 1969.[81] This small revolutionary organisation published a number of pamphlets and books throughout the 1970s and was organised by Jeremy Brecher, Paul Mattick, Jr., Peter Rachleff, and Stanley Aronowitz.[82] This group drew on the tradition of council communism and attempted to adapt these ideas to class relations

[80] H. Arendt, "The Cold War and the West," in Edith Kurzweil (ed.), *A Partisan Century: Political Writings from Partisan Review* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) 206. See J. Sitton, 'Hannah Arendt's Argument for Council Democracy,' *Polity* 20 (1) (1987), pp. 80–100.
[81] Root & Branch, *Root & Branch: The Rise of the Workers' Movements* (Greenwich, CT, 1975). For an online archive of articles published by Root & Branch see https://libcom.org/library/root-branch-libertarian-socialist-journal.
[82] P.J. Rachleff, 'Marxism and Council Communism'.

in US society during the 1970s. The socialist tradition of workers councils was continued in the US by individuals such as Noam Chomsky and Richard D. Wolff.[83] Chomsky identified as an anarcho-syndicalist and advocated 'a federated, decentralised system of free associations, incorporating economic as well as other social institutions.'[84] In the UK, Solidarity was an organisation that identified as libertarian socialist, but was associated with council communism, in particular with the ideas of SB and Cornelius Castoriadis. This group was led by Chris Pallis (pen name Maurice Brinton) and argued that a socialist society could 'only be built from below. Decisions concerning production and work will be taken by workers' councils composed of elected and revocable delegates.'[85] They published a number of magazines and pamphlets from 1960 to 1992. In addition, Brinton translated and published many of Castoriadis' writings and other political analyses.[86] Finally, in Australia, council communists found allies in a small group led by James Dawson who published the *Southern Advocate for Workers' Councils* with regular contributions form Pannekoek, Mattick and Korsch.[87]

The councils were also an inspiration for members of the Frankfurt School, informing their conception of socialism as based on a collectively controlled society.[88] The councils never played a crucial role in the development of the School's ideology, but there are a number of key moments where the influence of the councils can be detected. In one of Horkheimer's early essays, he declared that:

[83] R. Wolff, *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism* (Chicago, 2012).
[84] 'Justice versus Power: A debate between Michel Foucault and Noam Chomsky' accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wfNl2L0Gf8.
[85] Solidarity, 'As We See It' (London, 1967).
[86] M. Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control* (London, 1970); M. Brinton, *For Workers' Power* (London, 2000).
[87] Gerber, *Anton Pannekoek and the Socialism of Workers' Self-Emancipation, 1873-1960*, p. 197.
[88] On the connection between the workers' councils and Frankfurt School see Phil Slater, *Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School: A Marxist Perspective* (London, 1977).

> 'the modalities of the new society are first found in the process of social transformation. The theoretical conception which, following its first trailblazers, will show the new society its way - the system of workers' councils - grows out of praxis. The roots of the council system go back to 1871, 1905, and other events. Revolutionary transformation has a tradition that must continue.'[89]

The influence of the councils was more pronounced, however, in the younger Marcuse, who became politicised through his involvement in the councils of the 1918-1919 German Revolution. His experience in the councils decisively shaped his political views and presented an image of a future classless society.[90] Although Marcuse rejected demands for a precise institutional model of a post-revolutionary society, he viewed the councils as 'a seminal achievement of the revolutionary tradition' that pre-figured the 'new adequate sources of initiative, organization, and leadership,' which he hoped would be enacted by the New Left.[91] Central to Marcuse's conception was the councils' practice of self-government and self-determination, which revealed their central political task of actualising the freedom of those oppressed under bourgeois rule.

Following the decline of the Left in the late 1970s, there was a gradual receding of the councils from socialist thought as groups turned to new forms of a 'third way' between state socialism and capitalism. Indicative of the changing fate of the councils in political thought, the leading representative of the next generation of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas, considered the idea of a society integrated through

[89] M. Horkheimer, 'The Authoritarian State,' in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. eds. A. Arato and E. Gebhardt (New York, 1982), p. 104.
[90] D. Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley, 1985), p. 16.
[91] H. Marcuse, *Counter-revolution and Revolt* (Boston, 1972), p. 44.

associations such as the councils 'always utopian.'[92] He contended that the 'idea of workers' self-governance had to fail' and that 'today it is even less workable' given the growing social complexity and organisational needs of modern society.[93]

Conclusion

In light of the revival of interest in workers' councils and the council concept, this article has sought to provide greater coherence to the tradition of council thought. It has contributed to promoting an understanding of how the influence of workers' councils has extended beyond the narrow confines of council communist ideology to reach broader sections of political thought. It has brought together a constellation of twentieth century thinkers to make the argument for a more diverse and complex interpretation of the council tradition. This revised understanding should inform scholars working in the history of political thought at the intersections of libertarian socialist and radical democratic theory, but also scholars working in normative approaches to contemporary political theory who draw from the thought of this period.

In particular, we have seen that in post-War Europe there were at least three re-appropriations of the council tradition in *post-Marxist*, *liberal* and *republican* political theory. These different readings of the council tradition assist us to understand not

[92] J. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), p. 481.
[93] Ibid., p. 479. But since these remarks Habermas has altered his view and now concedes that models of market socialism 'pick up the correct idea of retaining a market economy's effective steering effects and impulses without at the same time accepting the negative consequences of a systemically reproduced distribution of "bads" and "goods".' J. Habermas, 'A Conversation about Questions of Political Theory,' in *A Berlin Republic: Writings on Germany* (Lincoln, 1997), pp. 141–42.

only how the councils have been historically interpreted but also how they may be further developed within political theory. For post-Marxists, the councils provide an appealing model for imagining a self-determining society in which citizens play an active role in social and political institutions. The councils are an open and flexible institutional schema that could create more opportunities for citizens to engage in the management and planning of social life. For liberals, the councils could be combined with other institutions such as a parliament, the rule of law and an independent judiciary to increase citizen participation in politics while maintaining checks on the exercise of political power. Liberal readings of the council tradition emphasise the rejuvenation the councils offered to civil society while highlighting the need to balance the council system with other liberal institutions. Republican political theorists value the councils as institutions of self-government ensuring the deliberation and decision-making of citizens as active participants of a political community. Republicans may be sceptical of the possibility of organising workplaces through councils, although the desire to reduce domination occurring within the workplace may also appeal to certain neo-republican writers. The continuation of future work within the tradition of council thought depends on how the history of the tradition is understood. This article has sought to ~~demonstrate~~ shed light on the tensions of the tradition ~~that the tradition~~ of council thought and to demonstrate that it is more complex and developed than is usually acknowledged.